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Savage Justice Eroding Feminism in Mahasweta Devi's Mother of 1084 and Draupadi

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Abstract

When democracy was still in its phase of being somewhat new to India and the country was still struggling to establish a meaningful socio-political identity, bringing a stigma to the name of the nation was the callous patriarchal socio-cultural pattern corroding the picture of a just society. The dream of a new India was proving to be unattainable due to many socio-political inhibitions and malpractices conducted in the name of justice. Observing such dark and dismal circumstances around them, many Indian writers took it as their responsibility to uncover the shrouded reality of the marginalized and downtrodden to document the hidden facts. They repeatedly developed such female protagonists who try to shatter the notion of patriarchal hegemony by raising their voice of protest. To inspire the suffering women, who were the easy targets of the tyrannical perpetrators of injustice, these writers attempted to present the narratives inspired by the rare comradeship of many females of contemporary times. The two works by the Indian writer Mahasweta Devi, which use as a backdrop the Naxalite Revolution hovering the socio-political milieus of West Bengal in the 1960s and 1970s, *Mother of 1084* (1974) and *Dropdi* (1978), provide an insightful and thought-provoking saga of the times. The present paper has been written with the belief that today's readers need to learn the fact that the independent stature of most of today's Indian women was not attained in a day. It took many years of sacrifices and bold reactions against the yoke of patriarchy by women of different regions of India, which has brought us to the times when Indian women can aspire of fulfilling their dreams.

Keywords: Mahasweta, Dropdi, Naxalite, Nandini, Senanayak

Many Indian Women Writers have devotedly presented poignant narratives of female subjugation and struggle for emancipation against the backdrop of callous patriarchal socio-cultural pattern prevailing in India in the

post-independence decades. They have repeatedly developed such female protagonists who try to shatter the notion of patriarchal hegemony by raising their voice of protest. The dream of a new India had seemed to be a myth due to many socio-political inhibitions and malpractices conducted in the name of justice and democracy. Women and other marginalized sections were the worst victims. Observing such dark and traumatic reality around them, many writers took it as their duty to expose the veiled saga of the downtrodden to document the truth before it gets buried. Moreover, they attempted to present the rare comradeship of many females of contemporary times, the unsung warriors, who became the forerunners for strong-willed females, courageous to lead an unfettered existence. One such name is of the celebrated Indian writer Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016).

It is true that 'difficult times call for difficult measures, but should it be at the cost of humanitarian values? As one goes through the heart-breaking renditions of the atmosphere of brutality and mayhem in Mahasweta Devi's novel *Mother of 1084* (1974) and her short story *Draupadi* (1978), one cannot help but wonder at the level of savagery humans can stoop to. The two works, which use as a backdrop the Naxalite Revolution hovering the socio-political milieus of West Bengal in the 1960s and 1970s, provide an insightful and thought-provoking saga of the times. No doubt, the radical elements causing turbulence in a state need to be crushed and eliminated, but the ultra-strong countermeasures taken by the police and the governing authorities often crossed the bounds of atrocity and made the situation utterly deplorable. In the novel *Mother of 1084*, it is Nandini, a suspected Naxalite activist, who had to undergo unspeakable physical and mental torture in the police custody and in the short story, *Draupadi*, the protagonist, had to suffer through the most

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severe brutality when caught by the police. Persecution of the innocent and weak had become the order of the day.

Nandini has been depicted as a young, dynamic activist who was ready to pawn all she had to establish a humanitarian society. Not only she was the figure who had to go against the rigid social norms built to subjugate women, but she was also the only living member of her radical group who became the target of most callous torture perpetrated by the authorities. While most of the male members of her group got executed in the police encounter, Nandini's suffering was far more severe and intense. Being a woman, she became an easy target of lustful officers, who exploited her most atrociously in the name of interrogation. A victim of inhuman torture, she was not only raped repeatedly but was also charred by cigarettes and a glaring light forced continuously on her face, had made her almost blind. The use of rape had indeed become a common tactic used to terrify the female prisoners, break their morale and get confession or information out of them. The torture of Nandini had been more of a psychological nature in the beginning but had later turned into a physical one. She was shown the mutilated bodies of her co-activists, asked embarrassing questions under the painful glare of thousand-watt bulbs, tied by sharp chains, burnt with lit cigarettes and finally raped multiple times.

However, the mechanism of utter torture failed to break her as a visionary and the dream of a Golden future for her state remained alive in her soul, even under the slabs of darkness. Nandini slowly learnt to become indifferent to every torture that victimized her and while keeping her visions thriving, learnt to deal with her woes in the role of a third-person narrator. As Mahasweta Devi writes about her in the novel, "When she speaks, she has the manner of a storyteller, as if she is speaking of other people, not herself, not about her people." (698) The torment that she had experienced made her hard and impenetrable. Moreover, she became a source of inducing the spirit of protest in even a meek woman like Sujata, who till now had a complacent existence. In Nandini's description of her experiences of torment, we do not perceive any plea for sympathy, but it was only narrated to Sujata to shake her out of her cocoon of placid

complacency. This becomes very clear when Nandini exasperatedly retorts to Sujata:

"How can you be so smug and complacent? With so many young men killed, so many imprisoned, how can you wallow in your complacency? It's your 'all's right with the world', 'let's go on nicely' that frightens me most." (705) Nandini's vehement outburst helps Sujata in awakening her sleeping conscience and is a clear indication of her never-bending spirit.

The same kind of portrayal of torture of women prisoners can be found in Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Draupadi'. The story narrates the abject humiliation and torture perpetrated by the members of the police force on a young woman called Dopdi Mehjen, who participated in the Naxalite movement along with her husband. While she was caught by the soldiers in an encounter, her husband got killed. Then began the saga of the most inhuman torment inflicted on her. Unlike Draupadi of the Mahabharata, Dopdi was not saved by any divine intervention but had to face the worst kind of callousness possible to wreak at a helpless woman. She was brutally gang-raped in custody to make her terrified and obtain a confession from her.

Dopdi Mehjen, who had been caught for her role as a Naxalite partisan, was vehemently hunted down by the police and when finally caught and arrested, was most callously tortured by getting forcefully stripped down in front of numerous policemen and finally getting repeatedly raped by them. Her body had been violated most brutally and gagged and bound, taken to be an easy target, it was hoped that she would completely break after this 'punishment' and vomit out the desired information regarding her fellow activists after a whole night of torment.

However, no one had anticipated the reaction of Dopdi when she was given water to drink and clean herself and was returned her clothes to cover her mutilated body in the morning. She was supposed to be taken to 'Burra Sahib', who had ordered his subordinates to 'make her' throughout the night to break her spirit and make her talk. The sentry who was supposed to escort Dopdi towards the tent of his office was shocked at her actions, which were inconceivable and frightening to him. "Draupadi stands up.

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She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth.” (Critical Inquiry, Winter 1981, 402) Instead of quickly covering her body and getting broken with shame, here was Dopdi standing naked with a triumphed look on her face and laughing at the uncomfortable looks of the policemen around her. The writer has effectively portrayed the rebellious rage of a supposedly helpless woman, who refuses to cover her violated body and gets stamped as a victim, but courageously faces her tormentors with an unbeatable stance and instead of feeling ashamed or embarrassed, made them feel helpless and awkward. As Mahashweta Devi writes:

Draupadi shakes with indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, What's the use of clothes? (“Mahasweta Devi: Short Stories “Draupadi” Summary and ...”) You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? (Critical Inquiry, Winter 1981, 402)

Thus, not only do Mahasweta Devi's narratives aim at exposing the complacent hypocrisy of the upper-class people, but they also act as discourses of resistance against the institutionalized atrocity committed in the name of justice. The author also successfully demonstrates how even after the termination of the colonized status, the marginalized sections of the society, and especially the women belonging to such sections, were subjected to inhuman callousness and torture of every kind for a very

long time. However, both the narratives by the author present the female protagonists as rebels against the exploitative system, who do not bend before their tormentors as passive sufferers, but attain a kind of moral victory, despite their physical and mental wounds. As Jaydip Sarkar and Supriya Debnath have very correctly stated regarding Mahasweta Devi's multi-faceted fiction, "Her creative enterprise is geared towards making powerful, politically committed statements in favour of the subaltern, namely, the tribes and women and thus transforming her literary production from the cliched pieces of art into acts of empowering resistance." (7)

No doubt, the emancipated female protagonists of Mahasweta Devi's fiction can be taken as the harbingers of today's empowered women who have learnt to establish an unfettered and meaningful existence for themselves by raising their voice against the torments hurled at them in the name of justice.

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